

Chinese Support for the Palestinian People and Revolutionary Movements in the Gulf in the 1960s and Their Reversal in the 1970s

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During the 1960s, the Chinese gave substantial support to liberation movements in the Middle East. While the Soviet Union was one of the first states to recognize Israel in 1948, and Czechoslovakia supplied most of the arms to the Zionist militias, the People's Republic under Mao's leadership did not recognize the Zionist settler state.

The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was formed in 1964, establishing an independent entity from the Arab states for the first time. After a PLO delegation met with ranking Chinese political and military leaders in March 1965, the two parties agreed that the PLO would set up a diplomatic mission in Beijing, and the Chinese people would make every effort to support the Arab people of Palestine in their struggle to return to their homeland by all means, political and otherwise.

Up to the Israeli-British-French invasion of the Suez Canal in 1956, the People's Republic followed the lead of the Soviet Union in supporting the 1947 UN Partition Plan of Palestine, and called for negotiations involving the Palestinians, Israel and the Arab states. By 1963 China rejected that position. It openly supported the Palestinians' right to return to their homeland and called for a revolutionary armed struggle against Zionist Israel.¹

During the PLO's inaugural visit to China in 1965, a public rally of 100,000 in support of the Palestinian people was held in Beijing; similar anti-Zionist demonstrations were held after Israel's surprise attack on the Arab states in June 1967. Palestine Day was celebrated in Beijing every year beginning in 1965. The leaders of the PLO and al-Fatah were attracted to China because of the historical similarity in the Palestinian and Chinese experiences of foreign invasion.²

From the port cities of Latakia, Syria and Basra, Iraq, China shipped AK-47s and other light arms, 81 mm mortars, anti-tank rockets, field radio equipment and medical supplies overland to PLO bases. Contingents of PLO youth traveled to China for political and military training, and PLA instructors trained Palestinian guerillas in Syria, Jordan and Algeria.³ Beginning in 1965, leaders of the PLO, Fatah and the Popular Front for the

¹ "The Palestinians and China's Foreign Policy," by the Israeli Sinologist Yitzhak Shicor in *Dimensions of China's Foreign Relations* (1977) 159-171. During the 1960s and early 1970s, China stripped the camouflage from the Soviet Union's "opposition" to Zionist Israel with the reality that it had a policy of pressuring millions of Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel and populate occupied Palestinian territories.

² *China's Foreign Policy in the Arab World, 1955-1975: Three Case Studies* by Hashim Behbehani (1981) "Appendix 1: Fatah Military Study on China," 239; and *Green March, Black September* by John Cooley (1973) 175, 178.

³ Cooley 177-178.

Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) visited socialist China.⁴

Speaking to a PLO delegation in March 1965, Mao stated that “Imperialism is afraid of China and the Arabs. Israel and Formosa are bases of imperialism in Asia. You are the front gate of the great continent, and we are the rear. They created Israel for you, and Formosa for us. Their goal is the same. . . Asia is the biggest continent in the world, and the West wants to continue exploiting it.” Mao also tackled the question of whether a long period of military training in China was necessary:

The battlefield is a school. I am not opposed to military schools. They can be conducted. However they should not last too long. If they go for two or three years, that is too long. Several months is enough. The important thing is battlefield training. . . . To go back and take part in fighting is more useful. . . . You have your war and we have ours. You must make the principles and ideology on which your war stands. What is important is to begin action with faith. Faith in victory is the first element of victory—in fact, it may mean victory itself.⁵

The CCP advocated a strategy of people’s war as applied to conditions in the areas occupied by Israel after the 1967 war, and in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, where there were large networks of Palestinian military bases and refugee camps. Fatah employed similar tactics with Chinese weapons at the Battle of al-Karameh (Dignity in Arabic), a large Palestinian refugee camp on the East Bank of the Jordan River. Expecting an Israeli attack on the PLO’s bases around Karameh, Palestinian fedayeen (fighters) moved much of the population into the mountains. On March 21, 1968, 200 fedayeen beat back a heavy Israeli attack, knocking out three tanks and armored personnel carriers and killing up to 200 Israeli soldiers. This was the first military defeat suffered by the Zionists since 1948. At the PLO Executive Committee that followed this historic battle, Fatah asserted that its enemy was the Zionist state, not the Jewish people, and advocated the formation of a “democratic secular state” on the territory of historic Palestine.⁶

In September 1970 King Hussein’s regime in Jordan, fueled by an emergency airlift of U.S. tanks, heavy artillery and napalm, and covert assistance from the Israeli army, surrounded the Palestinian camps in Jordan, massacred thousands of fedayeen and refugees, and drove the remaining Palestinian fedayeen to southern Lebanon and Syria. This is called “Black September” by the Palestinians and throughout the Middle East.

⁴ In the late 1960s, China provided most of its political and military support to Fatah, the largest organization in the PLO. While the PFLP was explicitly Marxist-Leninist and called for the formation of a communist party in Palestine, China was critical of the hijackings and other external actions the PFLP employed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Behbehani 84.

⁵ Cooley 176. “You Fight Your Way, We Fight Ours.” A Talk with the PLO Delegation (March 1965), English translation in the U.S. Joint Publications Research Service No. 61269-2, 447-448.

⁶ Behbehani 53, 82, 85; Cooley 101; “Our Roots Are Still Alive: The Story of the Palestinian People” by People’s Press (San Francisco, 1977) 122, 127.

The Chinese also supplied military aid to the People's Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG) in the Dhofar province of Oman, which grew most strongly between 1967 and 1972. Chinese aid began in 1967; a shipment of machine-guns and grenades was sent to Tanzania, including copies of the Red Book and Mao's *Selected Works*, and transported thence to the Front. After a delegation of the PFLOAG Central Committee visited Beijing in 1968, they were promised increased military aid, including anti-aircraft missiles.

Based on trips to Dhofar by New China News Agency correspondents, stories began to appear in the Chinese press about revolutionary transformations in Dhofar. In 1970, Arab and European correspondents described the political education programs being employed by the PFLOAG. Besides the Front's own writings, much of the study material was from Mao, which was broadly applicable to Oman because "it aims at poor and middle peasants, sons of tribesmen, and workers of colonized cities."⁷

Socialist China's support for these revolutionary movements openly antagonized reactionary and neo-colonial Arab states. While pledging eternal support for the "Palestinian cause," the rulers of these states were extremely nervous about the effect of a radicalized, armed Palestinian movement on their own restive populations. In the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates were alarmed by Chinese support for the PFLOAG. At one point, the Chinese denounced "Egyptian imperialism" when the Egyptian army intervened in Yemen's civil war on the side of royalist forces.

In the area of state-to-state relations, after the 1955 Bandung conference China set out to form a diplomatic united front against the Western imperialists and Israel with as many of the Arab states as possible. It gave special attention to Nasser of Egypt (the first Arab state to recognize China) and to Gen. Kassem of Iraq, who came to power in 1958. China denounced the "Tripartite" Egyptian-French-Israeli attempt to seize Egypt's Suez Canal in 1956, the landing of U.S. Marines in Lebanon in 1958, and the 1967 attack by the U.S.-supplied Israeli Army on the Palestinian people and neighboring states. These positions solidified China's ties with some of the Arab countries. However, China's approach to even the most strongly nationalist of the Arab countries suffered from weaknesses in class analysis and understanding of the development of neo-colonialist relations within these states.

China also came face to face with a new form of neo-colonialism in which the Soviet Union attempted to step into the shoes of the Western imperialists. Socialist China was in no position to compete with the Soviet Union's offers of large amounts of

⁷ Cooley 143-157, 176, 181.

military and economic aid to Egypt, Syria, Iraq and other Arab countries in the 1970s. Most of the liberation movements in the region, including the Palestinian groups, became dependent on Soviet aid during these years.

In contrast to the Soviet Union, China's military aid was provided free of charge. In 1971, a leading Chinese party member told a delegation of members of the Revolutionary Union from the U.S.: "We give all military aid free, and we only give it to people resisting aggression and fighting imperialism. If they are resisting aggression and fighting imperialism, why charge them? If they are not resisting aggression and fighting imperialism, why give it to them?" After Mao's death and the revisionist coup in the fall of 1976, the Chinese leadership started charging for its military exports.

Chinese Support for the Reactionary Arab States, for the Shah's Iran and Revisionist China's Reversal of its Opposition to the Zionist Settler State

China's prior support for revolutionary movements in the Middle East was reversed in the 1970s. Closer ties with the Shah's dictatorship in Iran was the centerpiece of opposition of Premier Zhou Enlai and Deputy Premier Deng Xiaoping to Soviet "hegemony" in the Gulf. During these years, Zhou, Deng and their allies in the leadership of the CCP and the Foreign Ministry claimed that the Soviet Union had become the "main danger" to the people of the world, and that U.S. imperialism had become an ally of the People's Republic.

Chinese exports from Iran rose from \$3.2 million in 1971 to more than \$100 million in 1974. The Chinese Foreign Minister visited Iran in 1973, followed by Vice Premier Li Hsien-ien in 1975 and revisionist CCP Chairman Hua Kuofeng in 1978.⁸ In August 1976, People's Daily claimed that a five-year U.S.-Iranian arms deal was a "necessary measure" to meet the "threat" posed by the Soviet Union in the Gulf region.⁹

Specialized U.S. military and CIA interrogation equipment was used by the SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, to suppress the growing revolutionary movement in Iran. Support for supplying the Shah's regime with U.S. arms by the PRC was used by the reformist pro-Soviet Tudeh Party as an occasion to attack both socialist China and the Union of Iranian Communists.

Chinese aid to the PFLOAG and other revolutionary forces in the Gulf was withdrawn in 1973 in favor of developing diplomatic ties with oil-rich Saudi Arabia and the reactionary emirates in Oman and Kuwait. Chinese military instructors were withdrawn, and supplies from China were discontinued.¹⁰ This cleared the way for Iran's dispatch of several hundred troops to help the Sultan of Oman against the insurgents.

After Anwar Sadat took power in 1972, Egypt steadily moved into the U.S. camp. In March 1976, Egypt abrogated its "friendship treaty" with the Soviet Union, and denied

⁸ *Chinese Foreign Policy after the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1977* by Robert Sutter (1978) 147.

⁹ *The Middle East in China's Foreign Policy* by the Israeli Sinologist Yitzhak Shicor (1979) 175.

¹⁰ "The Palestinians and China's Foreign Policy" by Shichor in *Dimensions of China's Foreign Relations* (1977) 181-182; Behbehani 185.

naval facilities to Soviet warships. The Chinese government reacted by supplying Egypt with 30 jet engines and thousands of spare parts for Egypt's advanced Soviet-built MiG fighters. The following month, Vice-President Hosni Mubarak (and subsequent pro-U.S. dictator) headed a military delegation to China. The Chinese Foreign Ministry supported Sadat's "peace" negotiations with Israel in 1977.¹¹

After China took its seat on the Security Council in 1971, it failed to use its veto on behalf of the Palestinian people.¹² Under the influence of Zhou Enlai, Palestine Day, celebrated in Beijing every year since 1965, was not held after 1971.¹³ Zhou could not provide legal recognition to the Zionist settler state without alienating the reactionary Arab governments who he was courting. Zhou's actual thinking about Israel's right to exist was learned by European visitors to China in 1972, including Pierre Mendes-France and Pietro Nenni. Zhou told them that while the establishment of the state of Israel had been a mistake, its right to exist must now be reckoned with and recognized post-factum.¹⁴

Beginning in 1973, the Chinese Foreign Ministry condemned the Soviet Union's attempts to expand into the Middle East in much stronger terms than the U.S.'s massive military and economic support for Israel. In 1975, Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua stated that China was reconciled to the "continued existence" of Israel. Qiao also indicated that he opposed the repatriation of Palestinian refugees lest "a new problem of Israeli refugees might be created as a result."¹⁵ From the mid-1970s to 1992, when Deng's China formally recognized the Zionist state, a clandestine Chinese-Israeli relationship steadily developed, based mainly on Israeli assistance to the Chinese armaments industry.¹⁶

As the revisionist forces around Zhou and Deng grew, Chinese support for the Palestinians' right to return to their homeland was replaced by Chinese recognition of the Zionist state and military cooperation against the Palestinian people.

¹¹ Shichor, *The Palestinians* 169-170.

¹² "The PRC and the Arab Middle East, 1948-1966" by Lillian Harris in *China and Israel, 1948-1998* (1999) 51.

¹³ Shichor, *The Palestinians* 183.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 179.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 180 fn 247.

¹⁶ Harris 51-53.